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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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~ Happy Thanksgiving All ~ People Are Talking! ~ New Chrome Beta!
~ Worm Exploits Windows! ~ MySpace Suicide Case! ~ Spam Back On Rise!
~ India, Pakistan Feud! ~ Bill Dodgers Tracked! ~ Gaming Antivirus!

~ MS: 5th Worst Spam ISP ~ US Taps Online Youth! ~ French Broadband!

-* Ballmer Ordered To Testify! *-
-* Gmail "Hole" Actually Phishing Scam *-
-* U.S. Vulnerable to Chinese Cyber Espionage *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"*****"

"Saying it like it is!"

Happy Black Friday everybody! Personally, the day after Thanksgiving is the primo leftovers-eating day! And, I made sure that I did just that! Another great meal this year!

So, here I sit, leftovers all packed-up again and waiting for the next time I get some turkey cravings. My mother-in-law is back home, so we can now relax a little bit. Time to take stock of what we have to be thankful this year. My wife and I are doing okay. I'm working again, even if it's not a high-paying job. It will help out. One of our dogs hasn't been feeling himself lately, so we took him to the vet today. We've had our two dogs for over 11 years now, and they're like family. Check that, they are family. He's been coughing and hacking for a couple of weeks, and appears to have lost some weight. Also, he's not as rambunctious as he usually is, so we figured it best to get him checked out. He has a slightly elevated temperature, some joint pain in his rear knees. lost about 7 pounds since July, and the cough. We decided to have him get some x-rays to see if he had pneumonia or bronchitis. Turns out that there's a mass in or next to one of his lungs, and that's causing the cough. We don't know what it is yet, unfortunately. So, we were sent home with a couple of medications. Hopefully, those will help. In a couple of weeks, we'll see how he is. Meanwhile, we'll be considering getting an ultrasound for him to try and determine what the mass is. We're hopeful, but we'll try to prepare for the worst possibility. This will be tough, and we hope things will work out well. Butkus is a great dog, and really a pleasure to have as part of the family. The possibility that we might lose him is hard to contemplate, but I guess it's something that we'll have to consider.

So, regardless of the species, be grateful for the time you have with friends and family - you never know when things will change for the worse. Make the best of the time that you have together because tomorrow they could be gone.

Until next time...

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Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Well, I've put the pieces back together from last week's system crash, and all revving to get to the messages from the UseNet for the past two weeks... hmmm... a grand total of 25 messages for the last two weeks. [frown]

Oh well. I guess we'll have to make due, huh? I'm sitting here, digesting the copious amounts of turkey, mashed potatoes and stuffing, cranberry sauce (the REAL kind that you slide out of a can... as God intended [chuckle], and pie... ohhhh... the pies... lemon meringue, apple, chocolate and banana creme... yes, there was pumpkin pie too, but it's never been one of my favorites... particularly when there's lemon meringue or apple around.

I was happy to see the Obamas helping to serve on the food line at a homeless shelter or food share or whatever it was on Thanksgiving morning. Publicity stunt? I don't think so, but it IS possible. And if it was... so what? I don't particularly care why someone helps out... as long as they do.

I donated some stuff to the local share pantry. Not as much as I had wanted, but some. I wasn't able to donate a turkey, but there'll be stuffing, potatoes and canned vegetables for at least someone. I don't expect any accolades or pats on the back for it. I think we should all do what we can for those who can't do for themselves right now. There but for the grace of God, right?

Anyway, I'm full, I'm content, and I'm... oh hell, I'll be honest... I'm looking for leftovers already. [grin]

I hope your Turkey day was a good one, and I hope that you were able to give some goods to your local soup kitchen, food-share or church group. If not, Christmas is right around the corner now, and I'll be hounding you for the next 4 weeks or so about it. Give early and often if you can.

Okay, let's get to the news, hints tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup
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Our friend Guillaume Tello ask about Video cards for the MegaSTE/TT:

"Does anyone know the difference between the NOVA graphic card and the NOVA Plus Graphic card? Is the difference in the VME adapter? or is it in the ISA graphic card itself?"

Jo Even Skarstein tells Guillaume:

"I believe the difference is in the ISA card. A friend of mine had a Nova Falcon with a 4Mb ATI Mach 64 with VRAM, I had one with a 1Mb ATI Mach 64 with RAM. The former was (if I remember correctly) a Nova Plus."

Guillaume now asks:

"Has someone seen this card with "PROTAR VME ECME VIDEO" on it? A VME graphic card for Atari Mega STE with VGA output and the serial output too."

Mark Duckworth tells Guillaume:

"Most likely the "serial port" is a 9 pin video port. So just a video card."

Guillaume replies:

"We found what it was (on the french Atari news group) a ProScreen VME graphic card that gives to the Mega STE the TT High resolution (1280*960 mono)."

Last week, AtariNut asked about converting graphics formats:

"What's the method or software used to convert other picture formats (jpeg, giff, etc.) to img in order to use them for desktop wallpaper?"

Some one replied:

"I've always used ImageCopy for this."

Peter West adds:

"And for the formats Imagecopy doesn't handle, try Smurf. There is also a set of FALCON IMAGE UTILITIES by SKWare One, meant for the Falcon but some working on other STs as well. Other options are GemView and Nview."

Phantomm adds:

"If it is still available, Studio Convert is a good one."

Francois Le Coat adds this very handy list of applications and the applicable websites:

Smurf <<http://home.ewr-online.de/~gstoll/0a.htm>>
zView <<http://the.zorro.free.fr/zview.html>>
Rainbow 2 <<http://www.rainbowpainter.com/about/rainbow2multimedia.html>>
Positive Image <<http://www.netkonekt.co.uk/tachyon/flopshop/>>
Bitmap View <<http://www.raceme.org/atari/bv/>>
Xconvert <<http://www.beninde.net/>>
Gemview <<http://www.fiebelkorn.net/GEMVIEW.HTML>>
Digital Lab <<http://eric.dacunha.free.fr/DOWNLOAD.HTM>>
xnview <<http://www.xnview.com/>>
Vision <<http://jlusetti.free.fr/tele.htm>>

ATARI Search Engine <<http://eureka.atari.org/atari.html>>

I hope it helps."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Spider-Man, Batman Swing Onto Consoles!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News    -   The Latest Gaming News!
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Spider-Man, Batman Swing Onto Consoles

While superheroes may have taken over Hollywood, the video-game world has been harder for them to conquer. Sure, recent games featuring Iron Man and Spider-Man have sold well, but they haven't fired up gamers the way that a typical "Grand Theft Auto" or "Madden NFL" release does.

Maybe that's because video-game protagonists are already superpowered. A tough customer like Marcus Fenix ("Gears of War") or Master Chief ("Halo") could probably kick Batman all the way back to the Batcave. Gamers like their heroes homegrown - although comic-book stars are welcome in the virtual world, if the game's done right.

* "Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe" (Midway, for the Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, \$59.99): Here's one of those "what if?" scenarios that comic-book writers love so much: Who would win a fight between Sub-Zero and Superman? Or Kitana and Catwoman?

Yes, it's 11 popular "Mortal Kombat" fighters vs. 11 of DC Comics' famous heroes and villains. Midway has added a few new twists: Characters can pound each other through walls and fight in midair, and the developers have toned down the violence to get a teen-friendly rating.

As always with this genre, it's much more fun to play against a friend than against the computer. "MK vs. DCU" is decent fan service, but it won't hold the interest of anyone who doesn't care about both ends of its equation. Two stars out of four.

* "Spider-Man: Web of Shadows" (Activision, for the Xbox 360, PS3, \$59.99; Wii, \$49.99; PlayStation 2, PlayStation Portable, \$39.99; Nintendo DS, \$29.99): Remember the black-suited web-crawler from "Spider-Man 3"? He's back in "Web of Shadows," which allows Peter Parker to switch easily between his red (good) and black (evil) alter egos.

Unfortunately, the choices you make don't have much effect on which missions you'll fight - and those missions, which often require simply beating on a group of thugs or aliens, get repetitious fast. And the boss battles against third-string Marvel villains like Electro and Vulture go on forever. It's fun to swing through the streets of Manhattan with Spidey, but the rest of "Web of Shadows" is a drag. Two stars.

* "Lego Batman" (Warner Bros., for the Xbox 360, PS3, Wii, \$49.99; PS2, PSP, DS, \$29.99): This lighthearted romp is a real treat for Batmaniacs of all ages. The Joker, the Penguin, Two-Face and other miscreants are on the loose (again) in Gotham City, and it's up to Batman and Robin to stop their reign of terror.

The game is a mix of easy combat, clever puzzle-solving and an occasional ride in the Batmobile. And it's always a kick to bust open a box of blocks and reassemble them into some goofy weapon. The developers need to sort out a few issues (static camera angles, crummy artificial intelligence), but "Lego Batman" makes the Caped Crusader fun again. Three stars.

Symantec Launches Norton Antivirus 'Gaming Edition'

Symantec on Tuesday announced the release of Norton AntiVirus 2009 Gaming Edition. Designed for online gamers it maintains full-scale antivirus and antispyware protection without interrupting game play.

Gamer mode kicks in automatically when a full-screen program is active, so it also avoids interrupting presentations and movies. At \$39.99 (direct) it costs the same as the non-gaming edition.

NAV 2009 already has what's called Silent Mode, which suppresses alerts and notifications. And NAV 2009 already runs background tasks only when the system is otherwise idle. The difference between Silent Mode and the new Gamer Mode is one of control. Gamer Mode additionally lets the user suppress Advanced Protection, Intrusion Prevention, and Automatic LiveUpdate. It can even turn off antivirus protection entirely, though of course this isn't recommended.

The other big difference is in the user interface. All the same controls are present as in the non-game edition, but the main window has a rugged, war-torn appearance that Symantec hopes will appeal to gamers. And naturally it offers the same lightweight resource usage as the non-gaming edition. According to Symantec it "installs in under a minute, uses less than 6 Mbytes memory, adds less than 1 second to boot time and averages scans in less than 35 seconds".

Will gamers go for it? Symantec certainly hopes so.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Ballmer Ordered to Testify in 'Vista Capable' Case

The advertising and marketing company hired to create Apple's commercials poking fun at Microsoft's Vista operating system might get new material to work with. After Microsoft tried to protect its top brass from testifying in a case involving "Windows Vista Capable" PCs, a judge has ordered CEO Steve Ballmer to give a deposition.

In September, Ballmer tried to avoid being pulled into the suit and having to go through the discovery process, but U.S. District Court Judge Marsha Pechman has denied a motion to exclude Ballmer, according to the judge's order posted on SeattlePI.com's blog.

The plaintiffs showed evidence that Ballmer had personal knowledge of the situation, according to court documents.

"We will, of course, comply with the court's order," said David Bowermaster, a Microsoft spokesperson, in an e-mail. "Mr. Ballmer's knowledge about the Windows Vista Capable program comes from the executives he empowered to run the program and make decisions, and two of those executives already testified in this case."

Bowermaster is referring to two former Microsoft executives, Jim Allchin and Will Poole. Allchin retired in Jan. 2007 on the same day Microsoft officially released Windows Vista to consumers while Poole left Microsoft last month "to pursue other interests."

Microsoft thought the former executives' testimonies would take the pressure off Ballmer. Instead, Pechman ruled that Ballmer would have to testify based on several pages of e-mail correspondence in which he was included.

Ballmer will have to testify about his knowledge of Microsoft releasing "Windows Vista Capable"-labeled PCs that weren't powerful enough to run all Vista's features and could only run a stripped-down version.

In 2006 Microsoft, a year before the company released the Vista operating system, authorized original equipment manufacturers such as Dell and Sony to place a sticker on PCs indicating that the PC was certified as Windows Vista capable, according to court documents.

In February, Microsoft was hit with news that a group of PC owners had filed a class-action suit. Microsoft argued that the PC owners had different information about the PCs at the time of purchase, but attorneys argued that the PC owners did not receive what they paid for.

The judge at the time said the plaintiffs could not pursue a class-action lawsuit because the consumers' behavior at the time of

purchase would have to be analyzed. But the judge also said it was okay for the plaintiffs to argue as a class that Microsoft caused artificial inflated demand and prices for computers only capable of running Vista Home Basic by marketing them as "Windows Vista Capable," according to the Web site of Gordon Tilden Thomas and Cordell LLP, the Seattle law firm representing the consumers.

Ballmer has 30 days from the Nov. 21 order to pick a date for an up to three-hour deposition.

Carl Icahn Raises His Stake in Yahoo

In a move likely to fuel speculation over Yahoo Inc.'s search for a new chief executive, activist investor Carl Icahn has bought up close to 7 million additional shares of the Internet company, according to regulatory filings.

Icahn, a billionaire hedge-fund manager who threatened to oust Yahoo's board this summer after it rejected a deal with Microsoft Inc., snapped up about \$67 million worth of shares over three days this week, according to a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

Icahn bought 6.8 million shares for an average of \$9.92 each in three batches from Monday through Wednesday, bringing his total stake to 75.6 million, or nearly 5.5 percent of the company, according to the filing made Wednesday.

In his original \$1.5 billion investment in Yahoo, Icahn paid an average of about \$25 dollars per share.

Yahoo's stock rose 93 cents, or 8.8 percent, to \$11.51 Friday.

Yahoo is looking for a new chief executive after co-founder Jerry Yang said earlier this month that he will step down as soon as the board finds a successor.

Icahn has been among the loudest voices arguing for a new direction at Yahoo. He threatened to nominate a new slate of directors after the Sunnyvale, Calif., company rejected a \$47.5 billion takeover offer from Microsoft this summer. Yahoo gave him a seat on its board and two other slots for members of his choosing.

Microsoft head Steven A. Ballmer, after making two unsuccessful bids, now says he isn't interested in buying the whole company, though he has expressed interest in the search business.

Google Releases Another Beta for Chrome Browser

Google has just unleashed a new Chrome update that includes notable performance improvements for its fast Web browser. Current Chrome beta users will automatically receive the new beta release over the next few days, Google Chrome Program Manager Mark Larson said.

Beyond introducing a number of fixes the company previously rolled out

to its development channel, Chrome beta 0.4.154.25 adds features such as a new bookmark manager. Users will be able to "search bookmarks, create folders, and drag and drop bookmarks to new locations," Larson added.

Other notable Chrome changes are intended to give users better control of Web privacy. A new privacy section is accessed by opening the wrench menu, clicking on "options" and selecting the "under the hood" tab. "It groups together all of the configuration options for features that might send data to another service," Larson said.

Google also has improved Chrome's pop-up blocker, which had minimized pop-up windows on the lower right corner of the browser window, creating one "constrained" window for each pop-up, Larson said.

"Now Google Chrome displays one small notification in the corner that shows the number of blocked pop-ups," Larson explained. "A menu on the notification lets you open a specific pop-up, if needed."

Additionally, the latest beta release fixes a design flaw that allowed downloaded HTML files to read other files on the user's PC, and even send them to sites on the Internet. "We now prevent local files from connecting to the network and also prompt you to confirm a download if it is an HTML file," Larson said.

This week's beta upgrade is Google's latest step toward preparing Chrome, which currently runs only on Windows, for an official release in early 2009. Last week, Google Vice President Sundar Pichai told The Times newspaper, based in London, that Chrome will be ready to come out of beta testing by January.

Google is also planning to steal a page from Microsoft's original Internet Explorer playbook by working with PC makers to "ship computers with Chrome preinstalled," Pichai said. To widen Chrome's reach, Google also intends to offer Mac and Linux versions in the first half of next year, he said.

However, Chrome will have a lot of ground to make up if it is to successfully challenge Internet Explorer 8, which Microsoft has said it intends to roll out next year. Right now Chrome holds a tiny 0.74 percent share of the browser market, according to Net Applications. By contrast, IE8 commands a market-leading 71.27 percent share.

Microsoft said last week that it intends to release one more public update of IE8 in the first quarter of 2009, and follow that with a final release that incorporates feedback from the technical community.

"We want them to test their sites and services with IE8, make any changes they feel are necessary for the best possible customer experience, and report any critical issues," said Dean Hachamovitch, general manager of Microsoft's Internet Explorer development program.

Spam Is Silenced, but Where Are the Feds?

On Oct. 14, the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, with help from the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation and New Zealand police, announced that it had shut down a vast international spam network known as HerbalKing.

It was a triumphant moment for the FTC, which said that the group had been linked to as much as a third of the junk e-mail on the Internet. In an interview with The New York Times, FTC Commissioner Jon Leibowitz was modest in his appraisal of the situation. "They were sending extraordinary amounts of spam," he said. "We are hoping at some level that this will help make a small dent in the amount of spam coming into consumers' in-boxes."

The FTC's HerbalKing operation grabbed a lot of headlines, but it didn't do much to reduce the amount of spam on the Internet, researchers say. Within a week, spam was as big of a problem as ever.

Instead, it took another operation, two weeks later, against the ISP (Internet service provider) McColo in San Jose, California, to really reduce the amount of spam. But although McColo appears to have been a playground for Internet criminals, no federal agency, not the FTC, not the FBI, not the Secret Service or the Department of Justice, was involved in shutting it down.

With McColo, Internet researchers and Washington Post reporter Brian Krebs essentially shamed ISPs Global Crossing and Hurricane Electric into dropping service for McColo, whose network had been associated with a range of illegal activity from hacked botnet computers to spam and even child pornography.

Unlike HerbalKing, the results after McColo's takedown were dramatic. About half of the spam on the Internet disappeared.

Cisco Systems' IronPort division says that though there have been some brief spikes in activity, spam is still down significantly from where it was prior to the McColo takedown. McColo could not be reached for comment on this story.

But two weeks after McColo was dropped by its network providers, the company's data center remains untouched. That frustrates some security researchers who say that the servers used to control these operations could provide a treasure trove of evidence about cybercriminals.

"It doesn't surprise me, although it does disappoint me," said Richard Cox, CIO with the antispam group Spamhaus. Cox, who works with law enforcement on spam cases, says that while federal investigators may understand how an operation like McColo works, getting their bosses to agree to take action can be difficult. "The people in the trenches are being directed by people who think they're politicians," he said.

McColo was on the federal government's radar, as are dozens of other service providers worldwide that are known providers of so-called bulletproof hosting services, which are never taken down, despite complaints, according to a source in a federal law enforcement agency who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the press.

While researchers may feel they have a case against McColo, it's another thing entirely to convince a U.S. Department of Justice attorney to ask for a warrant to seize hundreds of servers, and even harder to get a federal judge to authorize this. "There's a reason why we didn't just go and grab all the servers," he said. "If you want a warrant for hundreds of servers... that's very difficult."

The DOJ and the FBI declined to comment on McColo.

Another problem: The criminals associated with McColo are thought to live in Russia and eastern Europe, where computer crimes are rarely prosecuted. So a successful prosecution would require extradition and that could be very hard to pull off, observers say. "You take down McColo and what you've actually got is one hell of a load for the lawyers at the Department of Justice and very little return, because you've actually got to go outside of the U.S. to pick up the actual culprits," Cox said.

While there's no doubt that the activities associated with McColo are illegal under U.S. law, the idea that you could prosecute an ISP for abetting illegal activity is largely unproven, so any prosecutor that took on this case would be taking a big risk that the case would be tossed out of court.

There is at least one precedent however. On Feb. 14, 2004, the FBI shut down operations at a small Ohio ISP called Creative Internet Techniques in an event the FBI dubbed the Cyber Saint Valentine's Day Massacre. At the time, it was the largest FBI takedown in the organization's history. Nearly 300 servers were seized after Creative Internet, also known as FooNet, was linked to distributed denial of service attacks.

The reason why some security experts have called for a similar takedown at McColo has, in part, to do with the sneaky way that McColo's customers were disrupted. Researchers say that McColo computers weren't actually sending out spam, just running the command and control servers that marshalled an estimated half-million infected botnet computers. These infected machines would take their instructions from servers on McColo's network, but should those computers ever be knocked offline, they were given several other backup Internet domains to check for commands.

To keep things secret, the criminals hadn't registered these domains, but they had coded several hundred of them into their botnet software. But the researchers learned these domain names by looking at the botnet code to find out what the hacked computers would do when McColo went down. Shortly before the McColo network was knocked offline by Global Crossing and Hurricane Electric, researchers registered the hundreds of backup domains themselves.

When the botnets couldn't go to McColo's IP (Internet Protocol) space for instructions, they started looking for their backup domains, but these were controlled by security researchers. Now, disconnected from their control servers, and unable to connect to a backup, two of the Internet's worst botnets, Srizbi and Rustock, have been decapitated.

"There have got to be hundreds of thousands of bots out there that aren't phoning home right now" said Joe Stewart, a botnet expert with SecureWorks who has tracked the McColo situation.

These bots might well be disabled for good, provided McColo's computers do not get brought back online. But that's exactly what happened a week ago, when a reseller of Swedish ISP TeliaSonera reconnected McColo temporarily.

The mistake was quickly noted, and TeliaSonera quickly disconnected McColo. But security vendor FireEye reckons that the bad guys were able to regain control of thousands of botnet computers during this brief window of opportunity. When McColo went back on the Internet, its IP

address space worked again and cybercriminals were able to send instructions to their botnet computers. They would not have been able to do this had the FBI been able to shut down McColo's San Jose, California, data center, as it did with Creative Internet.

Creative Internet was exceptionally brazen about its activities and that type of raid is unlikely to happen again, said Spamhaus' Cox. "You can't prove those sort of cases to a sufficient level to get it to a grand jury," he said. ISPs are almost always given a pass when this type of activity is discovered on their network because they can plausibly deny that they knew anything about it.

The FTC would like to change that, however. In April, the FTC asked Congress for changes to the FTC Act that would allow it to pursue those who aided and abetted in fraud, which would allow it to go targets such as bad actor ISPs who have helped fraudulent businesses.

Congress has already granted the FTC a similar authority to go after brokers who knowingly provide lists to telemarketers, said Steven Wernikoff, a staff attorney with the FTC. "It's hard to see why people who facilitate fraud via the Internet should get a pass," he said.

The structure of cybercrime operations has morphed in recent years and will need to be prosecuted more like long-running Mafia investigations than one-off actions against individual spammers, observers say.

"Ultimately, the problem is that we're still in the process of building a mature cybercrime enforcement process," said Jon Praed, a founding partner of Internet Law Group, who has litigated against spammers on behalf of major companies such as Verizon Online and AOL. "Criminal prosecutions require a lot of resources and prosecutors are unlikely to go after someone unless they know they're going to get a conviction."

Praed would like to see the companies that are affected by spam work together to go after the criminals. He would like to see companies share information about bad actors and bring more civil actions against spammers and their enablers. If companies could keep cybercriminals from using legitimate businesses, they could change the fundamental economics of the spam industry, and make it too expensive for many players.

"All those bad guys need enabling services," he said. "They're not flying on the criminal airlines. They're buying their computers from reputable sources. They're using off-the-shelf business software, and they use credit cards and cell phones just like you and me. That means corporate America collectively holds a tremendous amount of information about the bad guys in its own hands....but it isn't using that information to stop this illegal activity."

He added, "Good companies are starting to realize they can reduce costs and attract customers by being more proactive against cybercrime."

U.S. Vulnerable to Chinese Cyber Espionage

China is actively conducting cyber espionage as a warfare strategy and has targeted U.S. government and commercial computers, according to a new report from the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

"China's current cyber operations capability is so advanced, it can engage in forms of cyber warfare so sophisticated that the United States may be unable to counteract or even detect the efforts," according to the annual report (PDF) delivered to Congress on Thursday.

The report cites news articles and testimony from U.S. officials like Col. Gary McAlum, chief of staff for the U.S. Strategic Command's Joint Task Force for Global Network Operations. It concludes that Chinese cyber attacks, authoritarian rule, and trade violations are impediments to U.S. economic and national security interests.

A spokesman for the Chinese foreign ministry, Qin Gang, said the report was misleading, impeding cooperation between the U.S. and China, and "unworthy of rebuttal," according to an article published late Monday in Secure Computing Magazine.

China is targeting government and private computers in the U.S., including systems operated by the biggest U.S. defense contractors, according to the report, which cited news articles. In 2005, hackers from China nabbed NASA files on the propulsion system, solar panels, and fuel tanks, and an aviation mission planning system for Army helicopters and Army and Navy flight planning software were stolen from the Army Aviation and Missile Command at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama, the report said.

China can access an unclassified U.S. military network called the NIPRNet (Non-secure Internet Protocol Router Network) and "views is as a significant Achilles' heel and as an important target of its asymmetric capability," according to the report. This "gives China the potential capability to delay or disrupt U.S. forces without physically engaging them--and in ways it lacks the capability to do conventionally."

The U.S. government also is at risk as a result of the global computer supply chain, the commission said. Computer components used by the U.S. and manufactured in China are "vulnerable to tampering by Chinese security services, such as implanting malicious code that could be remotely activated on command and place U.S. systems or the data they contain at risk of destruction or manipulation," the report said. Hundreds of counterfeit routers made in China were found in systems throughout the Defense Department, it said.

The Chinese government is training citizens in cyber operations at military academies, and tolerates, or even encourages, actions taken by an estimated 250 hacker groups there, the report said.

Chinese military officials believe the U.S. is doing cyber espionage against China, and believe that by striking first with a cyber attack they can plant misinformation and hide their tracks, according to the report.

U.S. officials and lawmakers have complained about specific incidences where they believed Chinese representatives breached their systems. This summer, two congressmen who have been longtime critics of China's human rights record accused China of compromising computers that had information related to political dissidents. In the spring, government sources told the Associated Press that they were looking into allegations that Chinese officials copied data from a laptop left unattended in China by the commerce secretary.

Gmail 'Vulnerability' Turns Out To Be Phishing Scam

Reports that a purported Gmail vulnerability was being used by unauthorized third parties to hijack domains turned out to be nothing more than a phishing scam, Google announced Tuesday.

The alleged vulnerability reportedly allowed an attacker to set up filters on users' e-mail accounts without their knowledge, according to a proof of concept posted Sunday at the blog Geek Condition. In the post, Geek Condition's "Brandon" wrote that the vulnerability had caused some people to lose their domain names registered through GoDaddy.com.

However, after consulting with those who claimed to be affected by the so-called vulnerability, Google determined that they were victims of a phishing scam, Google information security engineer Chris Evans explained in a blog:

Attackers sent customized e-mails encouraging Web domain owners to visit fraudulent Web sites such as "google-hosts.com" that they set up purely to harvest usernames and passwords. These fake sites had no affiliation with Google, and the ones we've seen are now offline. Once attackers gained the user credentials, they were free to modify the affected accounts as they desired.

A Google representative contacted me early Monday to let me know the company was trying contact "Brandon" to get more information on his claim, but there was no word whether that blogger helped Google arrive at its conclusion. As of this writing, the blog has not been updated to mention Google's finding.

While this security breach was apparently unrelated to Gmail's operation, Google reminded users to enter Gmail sign-in credentials only at Web addresses starting with "https://www.google.com/accounts," and not to ignore warnings their browsers may raise regarding certificates.

Internet Worm Exploits Windows Vulnerability

A worm dubbed Win32/Conficker.A is making the rounds on Windows machines, exploiting a security hole that Microsoft released a patch for in October, Microsoft said on Wednesday.

The number of attacks have increased over the past couple of days, exploiting a critical vulnerability that was addressed by security update MS08-067.

The malware mostly was spreading inside corporations, but also hit several hundred home PCs, Microsoft said in a posting on the Microsoft Malware Protection Center Blog.

"It opens a random port between port 1024 and 10000 and acts like a Web server. It propagates to random computers on the network by exploiting MS08-067. Once the remote computer is exploited, that computer will download a copy of the worm via HTTP using the random port opened by the worm. The worm often uses a .JPG extension when copied over and then it is saved to the local system folder as a random named dll," the posting

said.

"It is also interesting to note that the worm patches the vulnerable API in memory so the machine will not be vulnerable anymore. It is not that the malware authors care so much about the computer as they want to make sure that other malware will not take it over too," Microsoft said.

Most of the infections are in U.S. PCs, but there have been reports from Germany, Spain, France, Italy, Taiwan, Japan, Brazil, Turkey, China, Mexico, Canada, Argentina, and Chile. The worm avoids infecting Ukrainian computers, for some reason, Microsoft said.

Several bots, under the generic name Backdoor:Win32/IRCbot.BH, also are exploiting the security hole. They drop a backdoor Trojan that connects to an IRC server to receive commands.

Spam Increasing Again After Shutdown of Hosting Company

Spammers knocked offline two weeks ago when their hosting company, McColo Corp., was shut down are finally coming back online, security researchers said on Wednesday.

San Jose, Calif.-based McColo was believed to be responsible for up to 75 percent of all spam, according to Brian Krebs of The Washington Post, who broke the initial story.

Spam volumes, which dropped about 80 percent when McColo was shut down on November 11, remained relatively flat since then until a few days ago when they started climbing up, said Matt Sergeant, senior antispyam technologist at MessageLabs, now owned by Symantec.

Since Sunday, the spam volume has risen to about 37 percent of what they were before McColo was unplugged, MessageLabs said.

McColo was hosting command and control servers that were being used to send instructions--like send spam or Trojans--to bot software that has been planted on PCs, mostly in the U.S., according to Sergeant. "With no work orders to process, the machines simply stopped spamming," he said.

Some of the botnets, with names like "Srizzbi," "Asprox," "Rustock," and "Mega-D," are back up after connecting to different domains, Sergeant said. Some are connecting to ISPs outside the U.S., which will make it very difficult to shut them down again, he said.

"The problem now is that it was a lot easier to get a U.S.-based ISP shut down than it will be to get, for example, this Estonian ISP shut down," Sergeant said.

"We've stunted the spammers for a couple of weeks, which is a good thing for the Internet," he said. "We've increased their costs and, hopefully, that might put some spammers out of business."

Researchers are collaborating on the matter and providing information to U.S. law enforcement agencies, said Paul Ferguson, an advanced threat researcher at Trend Micro.

Some of the bots are programmed to connect to a new domain after a

certain amount of time of inactivity, he said.

Researchers have been able to get some registrars to suspend some domains being used and have filed abuse complaints with some ISPs that appear to be unwitting hosts, Ferguson added.

Woman Cleared of Felonies in MySpace Suicide Case

A suburban mother who prosecutors say drove a love-struck 13-year-old girl to suicide by tormenting her with a fake MySpace persona was acquitted on Wednesday of the most serious charges against her.

Lori Drew was found guilty of three misdemeanor counts in the high-profile case, which made worldwide headlines and prompted calls for social networking sites like MySpace to crack down on such activities.

She was cleared of three felonies by the U.S. District Court jury, which deadlocked on a fourth count of conspiracy.

Drew, who created the fake profile after her daughter and neighbor Megan Meier had a falling out, showed no reaction as the verdicts were read and declined to answer questions from reporters as she left the courtroom.

The Missouri woman will face a sentence ranging from probation to three years behind bars for the misdemeanor convictions. She could have been sent to federal prison for up to 20 years if she had been convicted on the felony charges.

Prosecutors say Drew and others created the fake MySpace persona of a 16-year-old boy to woo Meier for several weeks, then abruptly ended the relationship and said the world would be better off without her.

Meier hanged herself in October 2006, just hours after she had read those final messages.

Prosecutors claimed that Drew, her daughter and a teenage employee created the profile to embarrass Meier publicly and get back at her for saying bad things about Drew's daughter.

Juror Shirley Hanley told Reuters outside of court she and her fellow panelists cleared Drew of the more serious charges because they could not be sure who typed the MySpace messages that so upset Megan.

Hanley, 59, said the teen's death made the case an emotional one, adding that during deliberations, "You fan your eyes to try to keep tears from falling."

"This is about justice," Tina Meier, Megan's mother, said after the verdict. "It's justice not only for Megan but it's justice for everybody who has had to go through this with the computer and being harassed."

Experts have said the indictment, which was handed down in Los Angeles after Missouri authorities declined to prosecute Drew, was a first of its kind and was an awkward fit for the federal statute on which it was based.

"I'm not surprised at all at the verdict. It's what prosecutors commonly

call a compromise verdict," University of Southern California law professor and former federal prosecutor Rebecca Loneragan said.

"The thing about this case that really bothered members of the public is the teenager's suicide, and the involvement of a grown woman in (allegedly) causing that suicide," she said. "And the main problem is that the charges weren't about the suicide. They were about computer hacking, essentially."

Loneragan said she had already heard from members of Congress who wanted to write new laws that specifically address cyber-bullying and harassment.

A spokesman for MySpace said the site did not tolerate cyber-bullying and had cooperated with prosecutors.

"MySpace respects the jury's decision and will continue to work with industry experts to raise awareness of cyber-bullying and the harm it can potentially cause," MySpace Chief Security Officer Hemanshu Nigam said in a statement.

Feuding India, Pakistani Hackers Deface Web Sites

Indian and Pakistani hackers have once again taken politics to the web, hacking and defacing web sites in the two countries.

A group believed to be composed of Indian hackers took control of the Web site of the Kendriya Vidyalaya Ratlam, a government-run school in Madhya Pradesh state of North India, after the site was hacked by a pro-Pakistani group.

The Indian hackers left a message on the web site for the site owner, stating that the site had been hacked by Pakistani hackers, but is now under the control of Indian hackers. The message also advised the site owner to fix the site.

India and Pakistan have a long feud over the disputed territory of Kashmir which is partially under Indian control. This dispute has spilled over into online communities, Web sites, discussion groups, and social networking sites like Google's Orkut.

The Press Trust of India, a news agency in India, reported Wednesday that a number of government-run Web sites in India and Pakistan had been defaced since mid-November, as hackers from both countries try to score points.

France Mandates Nationwide Broadband For All

France will shortly call on telecoms operators to offer broadband services across all its territory for a maximum of 35 euros(\$45.15) a month, a government minister said on Thursday.

This would make France the first country in the European Union to effectively mandate the supply of broadband services.

It signals a retreat by France from its informal campaign to include broadband in EU rules for operators that are designated universal service providers.

A universal service provider can obtain public aid in return for ensuring that a range of basic services is available in thinly populated areas, and not just big cities.

Eric Besson, a junior French minister of state, said there was no consensus among EU states for making broadband mandatory in EU universal service rules.

As EU president, France was launching a debate on how to make broadband more widely available but this could take time to reach a conclusion.

With no consensus on broadband in universal services among EU states, France will take steps on its own turf.

"As far as France is concerned, we have decided, due to the potentially long time this debate can take, to launch a tender for a form of universal access to broadband from the start of next year," Besson told reporters on the sidelines of a meeting of EU telecoms ministers.

"We want that, from 2010, that 100 percent of French people have access to broadband which for us is at least 512 kilobytes a second," Besson said.

Two of France's biggest operators, France Telecom and SFR have already signaled they will comply by the end of 2009 to include broadband among their universal services, Besson said.

It was unclear if the operators will be eligible for aid in return for giving such commitments.

The European Commission has yet to give its final decision on whether it will propose including broadband in the list of universal services.

"We are disappointed that the European Commission has not made proposals to this effect," Besson said.

The Commission has said that widespread broadband access was key to helping start up companies flourish, particularly in rural areas and it included money to underpin this goal in the economic stimulus package it unveiled on Wednesday.

US Taps Online Youth Groups To Fight Crime, Terrorism

The US State Department announced plans on Monday to promote online youth groups as a new and powerful way to fight crime, political oppression and terrorism.

Drawing inspiration from a movement against FARC rebels in Colombia, the State Department is joining forces with Facebook, Google, MTV, Howcast and others in New York City next week to get the "ball rolling."

It said 17 groups from South Africa, Britain and the Middle East which

have an online presence like the "Million Voices Against the FARC" will attend a conference at Columbia University Law School from December 3-5.

Observers from seven organizations that do not have an online presence - such as groups from Iraq and Afghanistan - will attend. There will also be remote participants from Cuba.

They will forge an "Alliance of Youth Movement," said James Glassman, under secretary of state for public diplomacy.

"The idea is put all these people together, share best practices, produce a manual that will be accessible online and in print to any group that wants to build a youth empowerment organization to push back against violence and oppression around the world," he told reporters.

The conference will be streamed by MTV and Howcast, he said.

The list of organizations due to attend include the Burma Global Action Network, a human rights movement spurred into action by the ruling junta's crackdown on monks and other pro-democracy protestors last year.

There is also Shabab 6 of April, which has emerged as Egypt's largest pro-democracy youth group, and Invisible Children, which spotlights atrocities committed by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda, Glassman said.

Others include Fight Back, which fights domestic violence in India, the Save Darfur Coalition, as well as One Million Voices Against Crime in South Africa, said Jared Cohen, from the secretary's policy planning staff.

Also attending will be People's March Against Knife Crime from Britain and Young Civilians from Turkey.

Cohen said Young Civilians is a human rights and pro-democracy organization which works online but has brought thousands of protestors into the streets of Turkey.

Glassman said the State Department is providing about 50,000 dollars in order to help bring delegates from the groups to the United States.

Among the speakers will be actress Whoopi Goldberg and a co-founder of Facebook.

Restaurateur Tracks Down Bill Dodgers on Facebook

An Australian restaurateur left holding a hefty unpaid bill when five young diners bolted used the popular social network website Facebook to track them down - and they got their just desserts.

Peter Leary from seafood restaurant Seagrass on Melbourne's Southbank was fuming when the diners ate their way through the menu, pairing oysters, trout and red emperor with some expensive wines, slipped out for a cigarette - and never returned.

But Leary, left with an unpaid bill of A\$520 (\$340), remembered one of the diners asking about a former waitress, whom he then contacted and she suggested they check through some contacts on Facebook.

"We searched a few names and there in front of us his face came up," Leary told Reuters, referring to one of the diners.

"He was pictured with his girlfriend who was the only girl in the group. We also knew where he worked, at a nearby restaurant, which was handy. It'd been clear they were in the trade."

Leary contacted the manager of the other restaurant, where both the man and his girlfriend worked, and explained the situation.

Within hours the diner returned to apologize and paid the bill - and left a generous tip for the staff.

Leary said the fellow restaurateur called him later to inform him that both the man and his girlfriend had been sacked.

"On this occasion I guess you could say that being on Facebook backfired for them," said Leary, who has no intention of taking the matter any further or contacting the police.

Facebook, which began in 2004 as a socialising site for students at Harvard University, has seen its growth zoom to 90 million members from 24 million a little over a year ago, overtaking rival MySpace to become the world's largest online social network.

Microsoft Ranked Fifth Worst Spam Service ISP

Microsoft is listed fifth in the Top 10 list of the worst spam service ISPs compiled by Spamhaus.org.

Spammers are advertising links to sites that "peddle fake pharmacy products, porn, and Nigerian 419 scams" on Microsoft's Live.com and Livefilestore.com sites because they know that the Microsoft sites won't get blocked by antispam groups, writes Brian Krebs on his Security Fix Blog at the Washington Post.

Spamhaus has been alerting Microsoft to the problem for some time, but to no avail, Richard Cox, Spamhaus' chief information officer, told Krebs. Other security companies, including McAfee and Marshal, have also been warning about increases in spam and scams on Microsoft-hosted sites.

A Microsoft spokesman responded to a request for comment with this e-mailed statement:

Spam and other abuse scenarios are not Microsoft-specific. Microsoft offers Windows Live, a suite of software and services that provides opportunities for customers to post and share their own content through Windows Live Hotmail, Windows Live Spaces, Windows Live SkyDrive, and other free services. As such, spammers have multiple avenues to target consumers with malicious activities. We take protecting our customers' security and privacy seriously and are continually working to improve their experiences while making industry-leading progress to mitigate such attacks through both oversight and technology advancements. Using Windows Live services for spam is explicitly prohibited by the terms of service, and Windows Live accounts that are found to be used by spammers are aggressively removed.

Interestingly, Verizon.com is listed at No. 9.

Black Friday Shoppers Tap the Net for Best Deals

Many holiday shoppers are expected to stay at home this year, letting their fingers do the walking, as they take advantage of their PCs and smartphones to shop online. Rather than driving from store to store, many consumers will leverage the power of the Web to search online for the best deals.

Total online shopping sales in the United States are expected to reach \$44 billion this year, a 12 percent increase from last year, according to the Forrester Research Online Holiday Retail Forecast 2008 report.

Although twelve percent is not a huge increase compared to previous years, it would represent a tremendous success in light of the economic doom and gloom that 2008 will long be remembered for. In comparison, offline holiday shopping sales are expected to increase only 2.2 percent from 2007, according to the National Retail Federation's September 2008 report.

As holiday shoppers become more comfortable with using online e-commerce systems - and more savvy with technology - they are also getting comfortable with the advantages and perks of shopping online.

While some shoppers will not break away from their traditional shopping - fighting the crowds for the hottest gadgets and newest toys and smelling, touching and holding that perfect gift - others are using their fingertips to find the best deals.

Free shipping has always lured online shoppers, and this year will be no different. More than 50 percent of online holiday buyers and 33 percent of overall online users said that getting free shipping will motivate them to buy more online during the holidays, according to Forrester's report. As a result, free shipping offers are expected to become ubiquitous among retailers and will not be a differentiator for retail competitors.

Forrester suggests that retailers use other differentiators, such as their own comparison-shopping tools for their best-valued products. Online retailers should also develop trust-building messages that will make online holiday shoppers feel more confident about using the Internet to shop.

Best Buy is doing both by adding a comparison function to its Web site and by offering special deals on Cyber Monday, similar to what offline retail stores traditionally do on Black Friday. And Best Buy has developed its own differentiator.

"From Dec. 7-18 we will be unveiling a different hot deal every day on BestBuy.com," said Erin Bix, a Best Buy spokesperson. "The Daily Deal is available for one day only and will offer shoppers excellent value."

Rather than wasting gas driving to three stores to compare the price of one item, shoppers are using the Internet to find the best deals, and businesses behind search sites are sitting up and paying attention.

A whopping 44 percent of online holiday shoppers will do additional research online to get the best deal, and 26 percent will use search engines and comparison-shopping sites to find the right products, according to Forrester.

In response to a challenging economic climate, PriceGrabber.com, an online-comparison shopping service based in Los Angeles, Calif., said it is extending a helping hand to online holiday shoppers. PriceGrabber launched a free Web site for online shoppers last month. The FreeShipping.PriceGrabber.com Web site includes tools to evaluate free shipping offers on millions of products from more than 1,000 retailers.

"With the current economic climate, consumers expect free-shipping offers, as they are spending less this holiday season," said Michelle Kane, spokesperson for Pricegrabber.com. "PriceGrabber.com has taken a step to provide additional value to our loyal consumers by offering a site completely dedicated to free shipping."

"In a recent Holiday Consumer Behavior Report, one in two consumers, or 44.6 percent, say they search for free shipping only, while 23.4 percent say they would pay up to five percent of the total value of the purchase. However, 20.8 percent of online consumers indicate that their threshold for shipping cost is dependent on when they need to receive the order," Kane said.

Overstock.com has also developed its own differentiator to lure holiday shoppers to its Web site with a contest for consumers who purchase items through its Web site. The company will pay off \$50,000 of debt for the winner of its Family Bailout plan. Entrants are automatically entered when they buy an item through Overstock.com.

"We're sinking into the most challenging economic environment since the Great Depression," said Patrick Byrne, Overstock.com chairman and chief executive. "This is our way of lending a helping hand to those that need it. In these tough times we wanted to do something special to help the families who visit us."

A 'Cyber Monday' Tech Shopping Primer

The Monday after Thanksgiving could be a bargain hunters' heyday this year, and you don't even have to leave the house. Not to be outdone by the brick-and-mortar retailers' Black Friday sales, online retailers will be offering deep discounts the following Monday, December 1, a day that's called "Cyber Monday."

Last year, consumers spent \$733 million on Cyber Monday, and it's expected to be even bigger this year. According to a survey by online shopping site Shopzilla for the National Retail Federation's Shop.org, nearly 84 percent of online retailers plan to have a Cyber Monday promotion on December 1. That's up from just 72 percent last year and zero percent in 2005, says Shop.org executive director Scott Silverman.

(Silverman's organization actually "invented" Cyber Monday in late 2005 as a gimmick to jump-start online sales in the holiday season. The media soon hyped it, and while it's not the biggest online shopping day of the year, it has certainly caught on among e-tailers.)

And there is evidence to suggest that online retailers will be trotting out even sweeter deals this year to compete for their share of consumers' 2008 holiday spending, although that spending is expected to be much smaller than last year, which set a record for online shopping. "Retailers this year will be very aggressive pricing-wise and promotion-wise," says TigerDirect VP of business development Bruce Matthews. "Cyber Monday was the biggest day of the year for us last year - bigger than Black Friday," he adds.

I suggest visiting three types of sites - Cyber Monday sites, tech retailer sites, and deal aggregation sites - on December 1 to find the best prices.

Before Cyber Monday, check out GottaDeal.com, which posts "leaked" Black Friday and Cyber Monday ads from many online tech retailers. Even better, you can also lurk at the site's Forum to find out about newly announced Cyber Monday deals as they come in. "I expect the online retailers to be sending an avalanche of info over the next 2-3 days and I'll be adding everything to that forum for our members to discuss," GottaDeal founder Brad Olson writes in an e-mail to PC World.

On the Big Day, stop by Shop.org's CyberMonday.com which posts a load of information on, and links to, the day's online deals.

You can also visit online retailers directly to get the deals straight from the horse's mouth. Here's what we know so far about the discount plans of major online tech retailers for Cyber Monday:

NewEgg.com: A representative says NewEgg.com will indeed be running Cyber Monday deals, and that shoppers should sign up for the NewEgg newsletter to find out about the deals in advance. Just type in your e-mail address at the site, and they'll send you the tip sheet.

TigerDirect: The company is not divulging brand names, but promises to have deals on HDTVs (a 32-inch HDTV for \$450, a 40-incher for \$700), and on PCs, notebooks, GPS gear, cameras, printers, components, and more. Tiger Direct's Matthews says customers will be saving anywhere from \$100 to \$300 on each deal.

BestBuy.com: A PR person tells me they're planning a two-day Cyber Monday sale that begins Sunday. Best Buy isn't divulging the details of the sale, saying only that it will offer free shipping "across several product categories."

Overstock.com: A spokesperson says the company will be offering free shipping site-wide, special discounts on TVs, and an "extra 10 percent off" cameras and camcorders.

Dell.com: Dell will be holding a sale on home PCs and peripherals on December 1, featuring PC's as low as \$300. No further information is available until the day of the sale.

Staples.com: The site will be offering deals on selected Envision HDTVs, Hewlett-Packard PCs, Xerox printers, Magellan GPS systems, Nikon digital SLR cameras, and numerous accessories.

Kmart.com: You'll find TomTom and Magellan GPS navigation systems heavily discounted. The site will offer free shipping on orders of more than \$29.

Target.com: A spokesperson says that Target.com will be offering free

shipping on more than 60,000 products (including some electronics), starting November 30 and ending December 13.

Buy.com: This site will have sales on at least one HDTV (\$1000 off one 52-incher, brand unknown), and on GPS navigation systems and various PC peripherals, plus deep discounts on some printers. For many of these items, it will throw in free shipping as well.

It's a also good idea to check out a few deal aggregator sites on Cyber Monday. Hundreds of these sites out are there now, but these are the ones I think do the best job with tech stuff:

- * XPbargains.com (<http://www.xpbargains.com/>)
- * Black Friday 2008 (<http://bfads.net/>)
- * Ben's Bargains (<http://bensbargains.net/>)
- * Dealnews (<http://dealnews.com/>)
- * FreshBargains (<http://www.freshbargains.net/>)
- * Techdeals.net (<http://www.techdeals.net/>)
- * Techbargains (<http://techbargains.com/>)
- * Dealsontheweb.com (<http://www.dealsontheweb.com/>)
- * Dealmac.com (<http://dealmac.com/>)

When bargain hunting on the Web for tech products (or anything else), it's very important to do your homework, not just to find the best prices out there, but to make sure that the "bargain price" you're getting is based on a real - and not an inflated - list price. Twenty-five percent off a list price that's already been jacked up 25 percent isn't much of a deal. For more information and tips on online tech shopping, see our Senior Editor Denny Arar's take on the subject.

A lot of people will be getting up early and fighting the crowds at the mall for that special deal on Black Friday. With everything you know now, you can spend Friday at home finishing off the turkey, and do your gadget shopping at work on (Cyber) Monday morning.

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